

On the Sharing of Worlds

Liz Holliday talks to George R.R. Martin

From “With Morning Comes Mist-fall” to “Wild Cards” and from *Dying of the Light* to *Beauty and the Beast*, George R.R. Martin has made a name for himself as a romantic – a romantic with a bitter edge that never lets him fall into sentimentality.

Perhaps it isn’t surprising that if you ask him about his background he is almost laconic: “Let’s see. I was born in Bayonne, New Jersey, 1948. Lived there most of my life until I went away to college, which I did at North-Western University, Evanston, Illinois, just north of Chicago. I have a master’s degree in journalism – can’t say I’ve ever practised it. Sold my first story while I was still in college. It was a sale in 1971 to *Galaxy*, a story called “The Hero.” Continued to sell stories in the years thereafter. Worked as a VISTA volunteer. VISTA is a kind of a domestic equivalent to the Peace Corps in the United States, or was at that time in the early 70s. I was a conscientious objector, so rather than go in the army you did two years with the Peace Corps or with VISTA. So I did that, but while I was doing it I was still writing science fiction and fantasy and selling it. I’ve done a few other jobs over the years, but for the most part I’ve been predominantly a writer.

“If you want to look at the periods here, from the early 70s through the late 70s I was writing my romantic science fiction. Then I did sf horror and contemporary horror for a few years, with the “Tuff” stuff mingling in with it as an occasional diversion for me. In the early 80s I did my two big horror novels, *Fevre Dream* and *Armageddon Rag*, and then since the middle 80s it’s been my work in television and film and *Wild cards*.”

Dying of the Light was an early work, but one which seemed to me to sum up a lot of things Martin was doing at that time. “It came out in 1977. I think *Dying of the Light* was the conclusion of the first period of my work. In the early 70s I wrote a lot of hard sf of a particular type: you know, very far-future stories set in a coherent future history, and frequently with similar themes of romanticism and lost love and so forth. *Dying of the Light* was the culmination of that.”

It was terribly romantic yet almost unbearably bitter too: “There is a sadness to romanticism. There always has been classically. I mean, the whole literary tradition derives from the romantic poets who were not exactly, you know, happy guys. I mean, Byron, Shelley – this is not exactly *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* here, you know. Their lives were definitely edged by hurt and as intensely romantic as their moments were, they were short-lived.”

Horror came next, but the transition to material such as *Songs the Dead Men Sing* was not instantaneous: “I did a number of hybrid stories about that time, in the late 70s. I was interested in seeing if you could do, within the context of a science-fiction story, other kinds of forms. One of the things I was interested in was sf horror. I’d always read horror stories as well as sf stories. I’d been a big reader of H.P. Lovecraft when I was a kid, and Poe and so on. So, I tried my hand at combining the two forms, actually in a number of stories.

“Probably the earliest one was a story called ‘In The House Of The Worm’ that I wrote as early as 1975. It wasn’t entirely successful; it works as a kind of sf adventure story but I don’t think it works as a horror story. ‘Sandkings’ was a later attempt to do the same thing, as was ‘Nightfliers,’ which was done about the same time.

“Then, about a year after that, I started writing a few contemporary horror stories without the sf element. ‘Remembering Melody’ was one of the first. I wrote that in Texas while staying with Lisa Tuttle. She was writing a lot of horror stories at the time. We were working on *Windhaven*, so I decided to come down and spend a few weeks with her and make some progress on that. While we were there doing that I was reading the stuff she had in manuscript and decided I’d try my hand at a contemporary horror story. I like to try different things. I always have. I suppose that’s my trick. As a writer it suits me but it’s certainly not what the market likes these days. Publishers largely like you to do the same thing over and over again, not to do different things. Different things are considered too hard to market.”

One of the things that is supposed to be hard to market, especially in America, is pessimism. Perhaps surprisingly, Martin has had few problems in that area, however.

“Well certainly a few people over the years have said that I was downbeat but I don’t really think it’s ever become a whole chorus. It’s not something I’ve worried about exceptionally. It was funny that in my early years I sold a lot of stories to *Analog*, which had a reputation for being a magazine that would not publish a downbeat story, and yet, nonetheless, they published a great many of my stories. There’s downbeat and downbeat, I suppose. With rare exceptions in one or two of the darker stories I’ve done, most of my stories, even the downbeat ones, say that life is worth living. There’s an affirmation there; and also in the science-fictional setting there’s a kind of optimism about the capacity of human beings to achieve. The stories may be tragic, in the sense that the individual protagonist fails to achieve love or conquer his goal and all that, but they don’t necessarily say that these goals are impossible or false. The pessimism, let us say of some British sf goes far deeper than that. It’s not just the tragedy of one individual person but almost a general societal collapse that forms the background of some of those stories.”

Oddly enough it is in his more light-hearted work – the “Tuff” stories from *Analog* (collected as *Tuff Voyaging*) – that Martin has dealt with the bigger issues that face whole societies. “Tuff” was fun and fundamentally light-hearted, despite the fact that they deal with some very serious themes. Tuff is very much the old-fashioned *Analog* hero, which is a construct of John W. Campbell and the sf of the 40s and 50s, that I find a little hard to take very seriously. So I’ve done him in Tuff, but I’ve done him kind of with my tongue in my cheek. It’s the ultimate power fantasy, right? Hop around the galaxy have a great big spaceship, remake planets at will.”

It couldn’t have been further away from *Fevre Dream*. Martin’s novel of vampirism, riverboats and obsession in America’s Deep South.

“In the late 70s I lived in Dubuque,

wasn’t what I thought it would be; it was nothing like the virtuals.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Before I went in that booth, I... you don’t tell anybody about this, you hear? You don’t tell anybody or you die. Got that?”

I nodded.

“Before I went in the booth, I was a virgin.”

I almost choked; it was an involuntary reaction.

“Don’t you laugh at me, bitch! Whatever you do, don’t you laugh at me or I swear I’ll knock your head upside the wall!”

“I’m not laughing at you, Castilla. I swear I’m not. But why the hell did you go inside the booth?”

“Why do you think? Because every woman who was murdered was murdered inside a booth! I’m a decoy; it’s my job to go into the booth!”

“But why’d you take this assignment? You could have turned it down.”

“Turn it down? Oh yeah? I’ve been on the force three years. You know what I’ve been doing all that time? I spent my first year searching the body cavities of women prisoners. The last two I’ve been touring schools, lecturing children about road safety.”

This time I did laugh. “You mean you were an ‘Officer Friendly’?”

“That’s what the kids called us, yes. Will you stop laughing, damn you! This assignment was my chance to be a cop, a real cop. I couldn’t turn this shit down.”

Frankie O’Hara was pounding on the door. “Castilla, are you all right?”

“Go away!” Castilla shouted.

“Look, Castilla,” I said, “if it’s any consolation, I think technically you’re still a virgin. I mean, what happens in the booth technically isn’t... well, you know... because there’s something between you the whole time.”

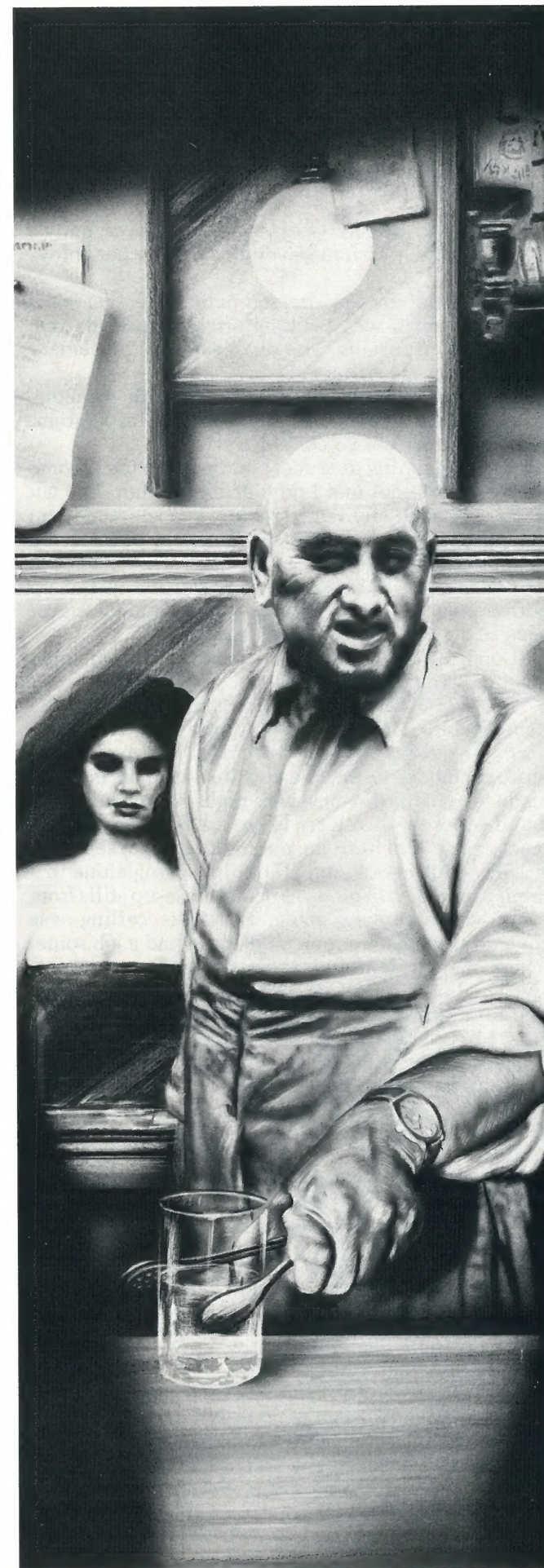
“Will you shut your stupid face?” Castilla growled at me. “I don’t need you to tell me about it, okay?” I didn’t need her to tell me about it, either. My own first time had been in a booth, but at least I’d been with someone I knew, someone I even thought I was in love with. And it was terrible, with that dim red light and piped-in music and vibrating walls, each in your separate padded compartment with a lubricated, disinfected – supposedly “infinitely stretchable, guaranteed never to tear” – latex wall between you the whole time so there was no contact and no chance of infection. The booths had been brought in after the epidemic of 2019, and now there were booth joints in every major city, except for Charlestown, South Carolina, where even virtuals were banned. Frankie was still pounding on the door, threatening to break it down. “Tell that boy to get out of my life.”

I pulled the bolt aside and opened the door. “Castilla wants you to go away.” He shoved past me and got down on the floor beside her. “Oh baby, baby,” he said. “Talk to me.”

“What? What do you want me to say to you, O’Hara?”

“Anything, baby. Anything.”

He moved in closer to her. I saw her reach inside his shirt and pull out his little microphone. “Get outta here, Gonzales,” O’Hara said.



Illustrations by Jim Burns